



## **Post-modern Joker**

### **Semiotics, Interpretation and Identity in Arkham Asylum**

Cortsen, Rikke Platz

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Post-modern Joker – Semiotics,  
Interpretation and Identity in  
*Arkham Asylum*

*Rikke Cortsen*

*(University of Copenhagen)*

I

**A***rkham Asylum – a Serious House on Serious Earth* is a graphic novel from 1989 written by Grant Morrison with art by Dave McKean. As a Batman story appearing at the height of the deconstruction of the superhero it was the bestselling hardcover graphic novel of its time with more than 500,000 copies sold (Callahan, 39) and became the subject of much debate. When compared to other superhero narratives, it distinguished itself by a visual style very different from the tradition and an ambition on behalf of the story's potential bordering on hubris.

*Arkham Asylum* is devoid of the usual action sequences and centers around the inner journey of the hero. Emphasis is placed on symbolism in the captions as well as in Dave McKean's evasive and suggestive

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drawings that combine gloomy, shapeless figures with vivid coloring in a way deliberately meant to make the outcome of their reading ambiguous. Critics have disagreed on various aspects of the book, some claiming that the manuscript is too laden with symbolic language and obscure intertextual references, whereas others have blamed the artwork of hampering the story with a media-mixing style much too dense and complicated. Morrison himself has voiced concern that the book was not very well received because of a clash between the artwork and the script, saying:

(...) because it became so vague, and because I was doing stuff that was so symbolic, and then Dave was doing his own stuff that was symbolic, we eventually had two symbol systems merrily fighting each other, with the reader trying to make sense of it all. And I think that's a problem with it. (Hasted, 66)

The intention of the present essay is not to engage with this kind of qualitative judgement on behalf of either story or art, but rather to look at the book as a whole, as it presents itself to the reader, considering the work a result of a joint venture between both artists. This investigation will show that even if the overall impression is one of partial success, some parts of *Arkham Asylum* use the medium of comics to pose complicated questions about identity and the construction of the subject in the post-modern society.

The decoding of signs, or semiology, is a recurrent theme and activity in the narrative. In a close reading of a few examples from the text it will be clarified exactly how this reading of signs and the ability to gain meaning from different kinds of pictures and words, ties in with the idea that the human subject might be fluid and

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lacking a core-Self. This angle of semiology is then linked in parts to psychoanalysis and the comic's strong emphasis on a discussion of sanity and the boundaries of the human mind.

Central to this essay is an examination of the various kinds of sign systems reflected upon in *Arkham Asylum* and the way they are used within the medium to convey a layer of meanings, intertwining and sometimes doubling over and complicating the reader's access to the story. It will become apparent how the complex and abundantly symbolic nature of the narrative and the problem of decoding it is foreshadowed in the failed instances of sign reading displayed at the diegetic level. The strong emphasis on the ability to read signs in this particular comic naturally makes this strategy interesting at the extra-diegetic level. The reading of signs and theories related to this makes sense in regards to the medium of comics in that it can be viewed from the angle of two sign systems clashing into a third; a verbal and a visual code being mixed in together. In the case of *Arkham Asylum* tarot cards are introduced into the system and further complicate the reader's accessibility of the text as will be discussed later on.

As this graphic novel has no pagination I have put in page numbers, beginning with page one as the first page featuring text. All text in the book appears in capitals, but all quotes in this essay refrain from this standard comic book lettering duplicating only writing in bold. Quotes from *Arkham Asylum* are all from the 1989 edition except when noted.

As noted above, one reason *Arkham Asylum* has been judged a complicated read is the creators' ample use of symbols and signs. A further difficulty is introduced in the structure of the text which intermingles two narrative threads unfolding in two different temporal contexts. One is the story of the founder of Arkham Asylum,

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Amadeus Arkham, set in the past. The other takes place in the present where Batman is called to the asylum because the inmates have revolted. In this essay the focus of the analysis is on the contemporary aspect of the narrative, even though it would be possible to expand the analysis to the past part of the story as well. The contemporary aspect more explicitly uses semiology as a means to talk about identity and offers a more obvious use of the decoding of both images and words and hence the examples taken from this narrative strand are more illustrative of the points made.

The Batman character as cultural icon varies its content slightly according to the writers telling his stories, and as the present analysis considers this specific incarnation of the character it makes no claim to general statements on the mental health of Batman. The conclusions are arrived at through an analysis of the aspects of Batman's personality that Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, consciously or unconsciously, have chosen to emphasize.

Arkham Asylum as place is important in the Batman mythology; it is where all the villains are locked up when the hero has caught up with them. In this particular story arc Batman's arch nemesis, the Joker, is leading the other inmates in an uprising holding their guardians hostage. The Joker dictates that in order to free them, Batman must come and play games with the insane cast of the asylum. The border between sane and insane in *Arkham Asylum* is very fragile, sometimes even arbitrary or non-existent as the line between the two is traversed a number of times.

### The Rorschach test

The games played in *Arkham Asylum* are controlled or initiated by the Joker and they reflect the ambiguous nature of his character as both funny, cruel and

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unsettling. Games are usually thought of as harmless pastimes where the importance of the games does not necessarily reach outside of the fictitious play. The word and image games that the Joker engages in with Batman might seem innocuous but they are carefully designed to harm the protagonist in ways he has trouble imagining. One of the games the Joker wants to involve Batman in is the Rorschach test, a test in which what a patient sees in a symmetrical ink blot helps disclose the workings of his or her subconscious mind. The test is used as an aid to help the therapist distinguish "normal" people from those who are neurotic, schizophrenic or in other ways suffer from mental illnesses (Rorschach, 120).

In a scene where Batman has just arrived at the asylum, the Joker takes over the role of the therapist as he shows Batman a card with an inkblot and demands to know, what Batman sees in the stain. After having disclosed his own multifaceted response by declaring: "Well. I see two angels screwing in the stratosphere, a constellation of black holes, a biological process beyond the conception of man. A Jewish ventriloquist act locked in the trunk of a red Chevrolet..." (Morrison, 30) the Joker's fingers dominate the panel as he turns the card to the reader who is put in Batman's place. "What about **you** Batman? What do you see?" (Morrison, 30) he asks. As this is placed at the bottom of a right hand page, the suspense is enhanced when the reader turns the page and sees a giant, image of a bat taking up the entire page. The first panel of the facing page shows Batman staring at the card saying: "Nothing. I don't see anything." (Morrison, 32) and even if the Joker suggests a sexual suppressed memory by alluding to a scantily clad Robin the boy wonder, there is a strong possibility that the darkest secret of the Batman's nature is not concerned with homosexuality but rather has to do with his vigilante persona and particularly its origins.

Interestingly, one of the most common answers to the first and fifth plates in the Rorschach test is a bat (Rorschach, 53 and 126-129) or as a matter of fact Batman (McCully, 201-202). Batman's response is problematic because he feels a need to deny the image that strikes him at the sight of the card. The bat is central to the creation myth of Batman and is closely linked to his childhood memory of witnessing the shooting of his parents. The idea of the Rorschach test as a screen for the projection of the unconscious, suggests that Batman identifies too much with his vigilante persona and is aware of the awkwardness involved.

In the 80s deconstruction of the superhero it has been suggested that Batman's primary motivation is not just righteous crime fighting but an unhealthy obsession with vengeance. Batman as driven by personal motives and trauma was the premise of deconstructivist narratives like Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* (1987) and *Batman: Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Moving the focus of his actions from objective righteousness to subjective avenging has the consequence that Arkham Asylum is filled with victims of Batman's need to work out his childhood trauma. In the sequence with the Rorschach test, the effect of the full page on a left hand page in combination with Batman's denial makes the reader uncertain if Batman is not potentially as troubled a soul as the people he has put in the asylum. Yet another deconstruction of the superhero, Alan Moore's and Brian Bolland's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), posits the notion that the Joker and Batman might share the same mental make-up, being more alike than different.

Batman is closely linked with both the animal and the experience of loss it recalls for him. It is the bat that calls Bruce Wayne back to duty as Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*, as it is a bat that prompts the young Bruce to invent his alter ego – in Miller's words with the seminal "I shall become a bat." in *Year One* (Miller, 22).

The scene with the Joker in *Arkham Asylum* discloses that Batman's childhood memory is always present in his mind and needs little provocation to surface again. Batman's own identification with a bat is underlined as well as his reluctance to admit to its constant presence in his thoughts.

The layout of the pages and the use of text and image as well as panels underlined by the page turning suspense is what enables the reader to decode Batman's thoughts and understand his motivation. In this way, the reader's ability to decipher the situation and its importance to Batman's sense of self is linked to the way images like the Rorschach test cards are read differently by various recipients. Batman's response is common, but his distrust of himself and his awareness of his relationship with the bat unnerves him and makes him vulnerable to the Joker's games. It is suggested that he is doubting whether or not he might be mentally ill. The Joker is aware that his opponent's dressing up as a bat is in some way linked to a troublesome memory or event and this knowledge is deliberately used to disturb Batman.

### The post-modern subject par excellence

The scene with the Rorschach test has Batman in a very vulnerable position, having exposed his unconscious anxieties and motives to the reader and revealing to the Joker that he might be on to something, when he prods the mental debris floating around in the Dark Knight's mind. The Joker is one of the most unpredictable characters in the DC universe, and he is impatient with the obvious response of those inmates who want to remove the mask to show Batman's real face:

oh, don't be so predictable, for christs sake!  
That *is* his real face. And I want to go much



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deeper than that. I want him to know what it's like to have sticky fingers pick through the dirty corners of his mind.

(Morrison, 32)

The Joker cannot be bothered with something as trivial as revealing the Batman's alter ego, and his comment conflates the identity of Batman and his alter ego, adding to the reader's impression that Batman has trouble keeping the two separate. As Tim Callahan notes, *Arkham Asylum* is heavily influenced by the archetype theory of psychiatrist Carl G. Jung and his thoughts on the relation between *Self*, *Shadow* and *persona*. (52). When the Joker suggests that Batman has no other face than the mask, it reduces him to his persona and following the result of the Rorschach test, his unconscious, instinctive *Shadow* might hold influence and dictate his *Self*. Bruce Wayne is absolutely absent from *Arkham Asylum* which adds further to the thought that Batman is the central identity of the two and Wayne is the one functioning as persona or mask.

The Joker's main interest is to make Batman realise that his mind has areas as dirty as those of the inmates of Arkham Asylum as the exposing of Batman's mind is all good fun for him. Dirty here signifying that which is rejected or repressed by the conscious mind – the amoral reality of acting out of revenge for one's parents instead of pure righteousness. This realisation is brought about, as we have seen and will investigate further, by the decoding of signs.

The Joker is one of the examples this graphic novel provides of how the line between sanity and insanity is very fine and often nonexistent. His behavioral patterns defy all logic, and as his therapist Ruth Adams argues, he

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may represent an entirely new species of identity and definition of sanity:

It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant new modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century. (...) That's why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real identity. He creates himself each day.

(Morrison, 29-30)

Even though the Joker is clearly a vicious killer and completely out of his mind, the therapist here suggests that his chameleon-like identity is a useful strategy for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – one that is successful and works better than a more stable sense of self identity. By avoiding a steadfast identity, man can transcend to a higher level of control over consciousness and navigate in a fragmented world lacking coherence. In all the confrontations between Batman and the Joker in *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker is in control, as he is fully aware that signs, images and words hold power over the mind, and he knows exactly what buttons to push in order to attack Batman's weak spot. The individual sign as a multiple signifier with a meaning determined by the receiver or depending on its relation to the contextual circumstances mirrors the way the Joker continuously remakes himself and changes the content of his 'brand' or name. The Joker becomes a sign that potentially refers to any kind of identity: maniac, killer, subversive enemy of society, bubbly entertainer, self appointed psychoanalyst or chatty adventurer bored with the easily foreseen actions of other people.

It can be argued that the therapist's words are not to be taken at face value and that the idea that someone as

off balance as the Joker is not in any way a plausible solution for the meaningless existence of man in the current century. But viewed from the angle of Ruth Adams, the idea of recreating one's identity anew every day does seem in a radical way to conform to theories of the subject that emphasizes the deconstructed self. The Batman universe allows for a consequent execution of this lack of core self because a figure as the Joker can exist alongside everyday life events. The question then becomes whether this idea of fluid self and recreation of identity can be transferred to the reality of post-modern day life.

### Semiotic crossfire

The following example is yet another of the Joker's games that reinforces his complex persona's power over semiotics. Using games to circumvent the conscious responses of patients is key to Freudian psychoanalysis, but in *Arkham Asylum* the Joker is using the games not in an effort to cure, but to control. Here Batman is submitted to a word association test where the therapist says a word and the patient responds with whatever comes to mind. The situation is shown in neatly framed panels whereas the images in between are fuzzy, signalling to the reader that these are memories or thoughts. In this double-spread the therapist Ruth Adams is shown in the left hand panels, Batman is depicted in the right hand panels and the middle panels once again function like visual reflections of the Dark Knight's mental images. The test begins with "mother" and ping-pongs along with Batman answering: "Ah. Pearl." - "handle" - "revolver" - "gun" - "father" - "father?" - "death" - "end" - "stop" - "stop" (Morrison, 35-36). The blurred visuals that take up the space between Ruth Adams and Batman on the page show elements that can be directly matched with the incident

in which Batman's alter ego Bruce Wayne as a small child experienced the death of his parents. His mother's pearl necklace that was ripped to pieces by the attacker, the gun that killed them, a child's drawing and a looming figure without a face stands in for the father Bruce never got to know, and blood stained lace alongside skeletal remains, all center around this one event in the lifeline of Bruce Wayne that changed everything. The event out of which Batman as a persona, alter ego and perhaps true identity was born.

Charles Sander Peirce in many ways founded the discipline of semiotics by focusing on the interpretation of signs and his distinction of the ways signs can be read can be useful at times. Peirce operates with a complicated system and notes three ways a sign can refer to its object: by way of resemblance (icon), by way of causality (index) and by habit (symbol) (30 and 181). If analysed through this categorization the therapist in *Arkham Asylum* only responds with iconic or indexical use, which is to say that she responds to the words with either likeness (like revolver-gun) or causality (like pearl-handle). As opposed to this Batman evolves his own semiology and interprets the words according to his own rules. Peirce's theory of the sign reflects functions of an objective system, and complications arise when the functions are made individual, depending on the user. The idea of the word-test is that the responses reflect the subconscious of the testperson which is what the reader is treated to in the images. Whether he is responding to words or images, Batman's unconscious always leads back to the death of his parents. It is *the* central situation that continuously lurks like an open gash underneath the surface of the vigilante. It is particular to the medium of comics that the analytical strategies here use the power of both words and images to arouse associations for the reader as well. Once again the crosscutting between panels offers the reader the opportunity to peer into

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Batman's mind and witness the images that make up the line of association he experiences.

**Significant speech balloons**

There are specific ways in which the comics medium is used to enhance the reader's experience of this psychoanalytic encounter. The second part of the word association test illustrates how speech balloons can be used to underline the content of a story in comics; the colour and shape of the balloons can emphasize the speaker's tone of voice, volume and other individual characteristics. The first "stop" Batman utters can be read as just a response to the therapist's "end", but the next panel clearly shows that it is a wish for the game to stop. Batman is hunched over and the angle is removed from the close up so that Batman appears smaller. Also the word in his balloon is smaller, which suggests that Batman is curled up pleading in a small voice not to be confronted with the memories the words conjure up. The Joker's contemptuous laughter crosses over the panels, too unruly to be kept in a balloon, as his red voice cuts through the air and dominates the scene.

When Batman agreed to take the test, he said: "Go ahead Dr. Adams. I'm not afraid. It's just **words**." (Stress in original)(Morrison, 32). This attitude shows his ignorance regarding the potential of words: images whose content contain hidden meanings that can be involuntarily activated. The Joker has once again exploited his knowledge of signs and their inherent power to make Batman defeat himself by confronting him with the dark corners of his mind.

In an analysis of the relation between the two scenes and their importance to the interpretation of the story, Callahan argues that:

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Although he [Batman] declined to define the images in his mind with the Rorschach test, he willingly participates in word association. He understands the symbolic power of images, giving the reader a clue about how to read *Arkham Asylum*. (51)

In my opinion the situation is the reverse, as it seems Batman actively suppresses the image of the bat and that his willingness to engage in the Joker's games has to do with a lack of control over words. The session reduces our hero to a sniveling heap pleading to end the game, suggesting that he had not anticipated the mental images that came along with the words in the test. Critics of Freud have often noted how the relation between therapist and patient in psychoanalysis can be a power struggle with the therapist in a highly advantaged position. In the scenes with Batman the Joker clearly sees this mismatched power position as something positive he can use for his own unpredictable purposes.

In their discussion of Batman's constructed identity, Sarah K. Donovan and Nicholas P. Richardson note with reference to the idea of a post-modern subject:

You are nothing more than the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) identities you live, or become, each day or even moment to moment. According to Nietzsche and Foucault, our day-to-day grind numbs us to these truths, and this lack of insight limits and constraints our freedom. But Batman is able to lift the veil and embrace these truths. (130)

There is evidence in the interpretation of *Arkham Asylum* to think the opposite is the case – that Batman is not able to embrace his hidden truths and that the Joker is the only one who truly embraces and lives life as post-



modern subject as he constructs himself according to arbitrary rules, what he feels like or the given circumstances. One could argue, the Joker's fluid identity wins in the battle against Batman's more static concept of words, images and identity. Donovan and Richardson support their reading of Batman by "rejecting the idea that there is some 'true' self underneath Wayne or Batman that connects them. Obviously the two identities overlap and are aware of each other through memory, but there is not much more to it than that" (131). But if the Joker indeed reinvents himself continuously, it suggests that he has no core self whereas the implication that all impressions for Batman lead back to an original trauma suggests that he does have such a core, and that it is a 'wound' that has never healed properly. There is no doubt that the Joker has the power over Batman and that the games with words and images the Joker orchestrates unsettle and scare Batman. In comparison with the Joker, Batman appears to be unable to circumvent his original trauma and it is doubtful whether he is actually capable of embracing this 'identity-core' of his parents' death and the response to it (becoming a bat). In stark contrast to the now mythic and canonized version of how Bruce Wayne became Batman, the Joker does not have an "origin" story, as the 2008 movie *The Dark Knight* emphasizes by having the Joker tell alternate stories about how he got his scars. There is no recollection of his name and various popular cultural phenomena have tried to give him an origin with the result that the Joker remains as shifting in his 'birth' as well as in character.

#### The tarot deck as sign system

An interesting use of semiology is introduced in the graphic novel's use of tarot cards as both an aid at the diegetic level for the therapists to cure their patients of

mental illness and as a visual effect on the extra-diegetic level which adds new layers of meaning to the reader's range of possible interpretations. When the therapists at Arkham Asylum employ tarot cards in an attempt to cure the villain Twoface of his "obsession with **duality**" (Morrison, 27) the result is not positive. Twoface used to be the honest lawyer Harvey Dent but after he was disfigured in an accident, he developed a dark side both metaphorically and literally. He usually makes decisions by flipping a coin which leaves two possible outcomes, and by using the tarot deck instead the intention is that he should get a more nuanced array of decisions. The problem is that Twoface is in no way capable of interpreting the cards and is unable to make simple choices like going to the bathroom.

Part of Twoface's problem is that the sign system the tarot deck represents can be confusing. In some ways the meaning is conventional in that the various cards are associated with moods, situations or feelings, but in order to use them for making decisions one has to interpret them according to context and there the fixed meanings can clash with reality. The meaning of the individual cards can vary according to the line in which they are drawn, which subgroup they belong to, and all cards have symbols and signs attached that are left to the receiver to make sense of. On top of this the decoding of the tarot deck requires some experience, so it demands a certain amount of practise before one ventures into making decisions based on the cards. The way Ruth Adams presents it, the therapists in *Arkham Asylum* do not understand that the cards are open to various interpretations. They assume that one card equals one meaning and that the solution to Twoface's problem is expanding the number of set decisions from two to more. The tarot cards point toward a system of signs and decoding that is somewhat controlled – based on elaborate but consistent allegories, whereas the psychoanalytic model points to more individualized and

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shifting meanings that vary with each individual and each moment in that individual's experience. Decoding Tarot cards is an act of understanding the future whereas the games are intended to disclose past traumas. Two-face's inability to make sense of the cards mirrors the reader's problems with making sense of the narrative and Batman's misunderstanding of the power of signs. The medium of comics can add an almost infinite number of meaning layers on top of each other, but the reader is not always able to make them out and the power of the visual and verbal signs become overwhelming, even if we think that the signs are fairly straightforward.

The tarot cards play a significant role in the ending of *Arkham Asylum* where Batman leaves it up to Two-face to decide whether Batman is allowed to leave the asylum by giving him back his coin as an aid in the decision. Two-face says the coin's answer is positive, but the reader can see from the drawings that he is lying. He is apparently able to defy the coin and choose for himself. He then proceeds to tip over a card house he has been building from the tarot deck saying: "Who cares for you?" "You're nothing but a deck of cards" (Morrison, p.103-4). The last panel of the book shows the Moon Tarot card that has been a recurring theme throughout the narrative. The Moon signals trial, initiation and a situation of choice that is often related to identity. By ending the story thus, it is underlined that identity is fluid. It is dependent on who we choose to be. And in the same way, there are plenty of connotations involved in the reading of the narrative and the writer and the artist only have control and power over these up to a point. Beyond this there is no telling what the readers might relate to in their memory bank or through random association. As we have witnessed throughout Batman's trials, having a core self can cause trouble, and being the Joker means having a completely fluid identity that

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accepts the multiple possibilities of interpretation, using one's imagination to the maximum.

**Out there in the asylum**

Having been exposed to the Joker's word and image play, Batman is treated to a game of hide-and-seek through the asylum, where he encounters many of the adversaries whose incarceration he is responsible for. He faces villains like The Mad Hatter, Maxie Zeus and Clayface and the story's climactic battle is between him and Killer Croc in a richly symbolic fight where Batman pierces the side of the crocodile and shoves him out the window. Supposedly Batman defeats his inner demons through this fight and is able to leave the asylum stronger than he came, having faced his trauma and fought it, he should be able to have a vigilante persona without being too attached to it or reducing his fight against crime to just his own childhood crisis and repressed memory.

However, the last pages of the story might suggest that things are not as settled as they could be. The Joker, whom we by now have learned has an excellent grasp of post-modern reality because of his unique condition, sees Batman to the door as he is released from his captivity. The Joker tells Batman to "Enjoy yourself out there. In the asylum. Just don't forget – If it gets too tough...there's **always** a place for you here." (Morrison, 102). The Joker's comment insinuates that Batman has not completely won the battle over his inner demons. They still cling to him, accompanying him out into the world making it his private asylum. And the Joker is apparently still of the opinion that Batman would find solace in Arkham Asylum and that his place there is not up for debate. He still belongs there but is temporarily set free.



### Concluding comments

It is true that *Arkham Asylum* can be a perplexing read, as there are many visual and verbal impressions piled on top of each other and the book is awash with intended and unintended symbolism. Through the many annotations to the book's 15 year anniversary edition, the reader of *Arkham Asylum* is treated to the writer's elaborate thoughts on the symbolism he has impregnated the story with. Here in the notes to the script, Morrison explains that his version of Batman

[ ] was intended as a critique of the 80's interpretation of Batman as violent, driven and borderline psychotic. [ ] Bruce Wayne would only have become conflicted and mentally unstable if he had NOT put on his scary bat-suit and found the perfect outlet for his feelings of rage, guilt and revenge. (Morrison (2004), manuscript, 5)

Yet, as this reading has shown, it is possible to look at the narrative from an angle where Batman is both repressing his memories and trauma and seems on the verge of a mental breakdown that leads straight back to his parents' death and that his whole being as Batman can be attributed to a quest for justice and revenge.

Morrison has in interviews expressed a grievance that his readers misunderstood the book for lack of trying: "In actual fact there's hundreds and hundreds of layers of things if you want to go digging. But my feeling now is that you shouldn't expect people to go digging" (in Hasted, 66). In accordance with the book's many misinterpretations or breakdowns relating to the way we decode various signs it should come as no surprise that the readers of *Arkham Asylum* have missed some points or even added new ones.

In his book on the earliest works of Grant Morrison, Callahan offers the reader a way of explanation in his introduction: "I'm going to show you how to read his work by pointing out recurring patterns and motifs" (1). But the question is, whether the reader needs to be pointed towards patterns and motifs or made privy to the writer's elaborate thought on Jungian archetypes, Aleister Crowley's tarot deck or the significance of Vesica Pisces and an interpretation of Batman as Christ? Is it not directly opposing the potential of storytelling the medium of comics provide by offering the many possible layers of meaning to insist that there are specific things the reader needs to 'get'?

At certain moments this comic shows how creators can utilize the medium of comics, its speech balloons, panel composition and text/image juxtaposition to make very complicated points about the condition of the post-modern subject, the dangers of nurturing a core self and the importance of interpretation. It would seem that having a fixed subjectivity makes one more vulnerable to the images and words and the connotations they bring with them. In *Arkham Asylum* power is granted to those who know how to decrypt verbal and visual signs and the character that lets loose and actively recreates a new identity on a day-to-day basis. If the ideal way to navigate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is by not having a core-Self, it is not obvious why a text should have a core meaning or certain connotation that the reader is obliged to comprehend. *Arkham Asylum* as a work is fluid and brimming with symbolism and various sign systems but it seems the only way to truly recognize this is by setting it free and leaving it up to the reader to make sense of it.

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